DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 039 CS 206 046

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TITLE Rewards: Knowledge and Liberation.
PUB DATE Oct 80
NOTE 12p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association (34th, Denver, CO, October 16-18, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques: College English: *English Instruction: Higher Education: *Language Usage: *Writing (Composition): Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Part of the reward for expository college English papers is, of course, letter grades, but careful writing offers two greater rewards: knowledge and liberation. Teachers can best motivate students to write by seeing to it that the writing they assign teaches and challenges, and by assigning topics that are important to students but ones that they are not tired of seeing. One such topic is language. Assigning students to write a paragraph in which they tell how many hours in a day they use language and how they use it forces them to think about the complexity of language. It is a topic they can easily write about because they know something about it, but it is also one which they must think about as they have never written about it before. To teach students that language is a very powerful tool, teachers can lead them to examine the subtle differences between verbs like "compare," "list," "define," and "describe," or examine redundant phrases like "throughout the entire." By writing "about" transitions students can learn to pay close attention to how transitions are used and what they mean. Euphemisms are another use of language that can be very powerful. By learning the subtle persuasion behind them, students acquire knowledge about the power of language, and are liberated from a faulty reality. (HTH)

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REWARDS:
Knowledge and Liberation

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April, 1980

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REWARDS:

Knowledge and Liberation

Friends of my young brother, tobacco chewing boys of 16 who did manual labor for the money with which they bought pickups and rifles and cowboy boots, told me several years ago about the kind of grades they got in their high school English class. The teacher played a game with grades, a game in which an "A" was worth $5, a "B" worth $4, and so on. Those boys knew a real dollar from a fake, and they thought the game was dumb. Probably as a result, they also thought the English class was dumb, and the work they did for it meaningless and without any kind of reward for them. The gimmick that was supposed to motivate them to learn failed; it was a children's game with play money.

When we ask college students to write expository papers in English composition classes, we ask them to perform extremely hard work--the work of thinking and of paying careful attention to words. We want them to take the work seriously. Like everyone else, college students want their work to mean something and they want it to pay. Part of the reward, of course, is the letter grade. We all know that. But we can promise two greater rewards: one is knowledge and one is liberation.

We can best motivate students by seeing to it that the writing we assign teaches and challenges. We can see to it that writing assignments are worth students' time. To make the assignments pay, we must find topics that are within a student's grasp, yet complex enough to warrant further study; topics that are important to students and yet topics students aren't tired of. In fact, one topic is enough if that topic is language.

Freshmen know a great deal more about language than they are aware they know, more than they have articulated; language is more significant in their lives than most freshmen think it is; and it is a topic complex enough to keep students and instructors intensely interested far beyond the limits of most composition courses.

At the beginning of the composition course, I tell freshmen that language is our most complex tool. I tell them that they can choose to master it and be free or acquiesce to it and be slaves. On the first day of class, to get freshmen to begin thinking about both the complexity of language and its importance in their lives, I ask them to write a paragraph in which they tell how many hours in a day they use language and explain how they use it. Most students are surprised by that assignment, partly because it has nothing to do with their summer vacations and partly because it is a new question. When they begin to think about it, many students discover that they use language every waking hour, to speak and write, to listen, and to think. Some say 24 hours--they include dreams in which they talk and listen.

I don't mean to suggest that these freshmen, on the first day of class, are anxious to write. They have the usual barriers--the fear of making mistakes, the shock of having to do something in the first class meeting, the agony of having to think. But the topic they have to think about is one they can say something about because they know something. At the same time, it is not a subject they have written about before so they still have much to discover. The payoff is that they learn something about themselves and they begin to think about an important influence in their lives--the language they use.

Usually the student who is reluctant to write is reluctant because he doesn't have anything to say. He doesn't know enough about civil disobedience,

abortion, women's liberation or the military draft to be able to say anything specific about those topics or the 100 similar ones so frequently assigned to first semester freshmen. And usually, the composition course does not teach the student enough about any single topic to make him comfortable writing about it. Usually, the class reads a few essays about politics, a few about religion, a few about civil rights, a few about language. That scatter-gun reading doesn't make a student sufficiently knowledgable about a single subject to state and develop an idea. He an repeat and rehash the little he has read, but that doesn't teach him much. There is very little reward of knowledge in that situation. Even in those classes where the reading text is one of the new generation collections of essays about language, chances are that instructors don't concentrate the discussion on language. It is easy to lose the focus of Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and to wind up on a political tangent; it is tempting to slide away from an essay on language and racism or on language and sexism into a bull session on racism or one on sexism.

But the composition course doesn't have to proceed in those scattered ways. We can teach students about one subject, language, by having them read and write about it and by having them discuss it. I am not talking about teaching the history or the grammar of the language, or its etymology. I am talking about teaching students to pay attention to language as a tool we all use, a tool so powerful that if we do not control and master it, it will enslave us. There is no gimmick, no play money.

After that first writing assignment which calls students' attention to the fact that they use language every day, every minute they are awake, my students and I discuss the importance of individual words, starting with the obvious--nouns and verbs. I start by giving students examples of sentences in which wrong words make unintentionally funny statements: "The house was

dark and haunted: it was bitch black," and "The police will never be able to control organized crime because they cannot find the hindquarters of it." We look at verbs like "compare," "list," "define," "describe" and for many students, being specific about what those verbs indicate is a new experience. Students discover that they use words only half consciously, from habit more than from thought. And they discover that as readers, they often do not pay attention to what those verbs mean. To make this point clear, I discuss the directions for an essay examination and point out that if the instruction tells the student "to compare," he won't get very far by making a list. Students who pay attention to individual verbs reward themselves on every essay exam they write by answering the questions instead of wandering around and saying nothing.

We examine phrases like "throughout the entire" and "final results"; students discover that they use phrases like those by habit, without thinking what the words mean. And we examine conjunctions and transitions, some of the simplest words we have. For the reading I choose an essay that has clear conjunctions and transitional phrases. In class, I ask students what specific transitions and conjunctions do. Of course, words like "but" and "and" are hard to define, and the meanings of phrases like "on the other hand" and "in the second place" appear to be obvious, but numbers of my students have never stopped to consider what those words mean to them as they read; many of my students have not considered the fact that those little words give specific directions in their own papers, and that it is important to choose those words carefully.

Then I assign a paper in which students analyze the transitions in a particular essay. As they write about the connections--if they are thinking at all--they become aware that the connections they make for a reading audience are as important as are the nouns and verbs they choose to state their points.

That writing assignment forces students to pay attention to specific words and phrases that they use habitually. And it forces them to pay attention to what those words indicate to a reader. That writing can teach and liberate.

One of my freshmen, on that particular assignment, moved from point to point in her paragraph with these transitions: "the most obvious manner," "key words...are the second (method)," "in the same manner," and "the author not only uses subtitles and key words, but... he (uses) conjunctions as a third means of getting from section to section." Her paragraph was very specific about the transitions in the piece she was analyzing--and to be specific is a main item I try to teach students--but what is more important is that the student was paying attention to the connections she used in her paragraph. The reward for that student was in learning about language by analyzing it, learning to use transitions clearly by writing about them. The reward was in freeing herself <u>from</u> habit and <u>for</u> choice. And it was in seeing her reading audience, the class, move the way she directed it--with transitions--to move. Her reading audience appreciated the writer's attention to detail--reward for any writer.

I use this first unit of reading, writing and discussion to make the point that every word counts. I think it's necessary to do that to overcome the notion many students have that only the big words matter. I also use the first few days to try to build the idea that we can choose our words--even the smallest of them--to say exactly what we mean. We do not have to acquiesce to habit or to the ready made phrase. I want students to know that they can make language work for them if they pay attention to individual words.

But there is more. The essays my students have read in this early going are essays about language, essays that give information about language or that discuss theories of language. The class time we spend discussing content of the essays is the beginning of an accumulation of knowledge about language.

Knowing about a subject central to their lives is rewarding to students. And because we concentrate on that single subject, I don't have to take time out every other class meeting to explain the educational, sociological or historical background most freshmen need to understand the essays usually assigned in freshman composition classes. Because my students are not hopping from one subject to another and because we do not have to give all of our attention to new content every day, we can pay attention to how a writer makes language work. While we are talking about individual transitions, we can also be talking about organization of single paragraphs and about overall organization of an essay--discussion that liberates students to read more efficiently and that also helps them to master organization in the paragraphs they write.

Then in the next unit we begin to examine some of the things that go wrong when people allow language to enslave them, when they don't choose words carefully. For example, we examine euphemisms. That examination involves discussion of why people use euphemisms, what that language habit does to us and what it does to clear thinking.

I ask my students to learn more about euphemisms by listening to the euphemisms people actually use and by writing a paper in which they make a judgment of euphemisms in general, based on the evidence they gather. The assignment requires students to engage other people in conversation and to listen carefully. This first-hand research makes students aware that language study is not bound to theory, textbook and classroom; it causes some students to examine their own habits. Some of them become aware for the first time that they use euphemisms themselves. Some of them become angry when they discover that they have misled themselves and been misled by others with euphemisms.

One of my students last fall concluded that euphemisms are a harmful security blanket because they cover up reality. He had heard "procured" for

"stolen," "passed away" for "died," and "liberated woman" for "homosexual" and he was a bit angry to know that people use language to make situations sound better than they are and to perpetuate false ideas. That student was moved to write because he had something important to say. But several other things happened to him with that writing assignment: he learned to pay attention to the language he heard; he learned that he was in the habit of using euphemisms for "death"; he discovered that he could prove his point by using the specific euphemisms he'd heard and that he could make his paper interesting by using the metaphor of the security blanket. He also knows that if he wants to fool an inattentive audience, he can do that with euphemisms, and he will not be misled by euphemisms again. I don't suggest that writing the paper was easy for that student, but I do suggest that for his effort he was rewarded with knowledge about language and freedom from misleading language habit.

Another student discovered that the people she listened to didn't know that they were fooling themselves with euphemisms for "failing." They kept themselves from thinking about academic failure by using such phrases as "bombed it," "totaled it," "wrote it off." That student realized, in her study of language, that, like others, she used euphemisms to keep from saying what she meant. She also learned that her knowledge of language was useful outside the classroom. At about the same time my student was discovering euphemisms, the editor of the college newspaper had run an editorial about theft on the campus, using words like "stolen," "victim" and "theft." A playful letter to the editor suggested that "misplace," "swiped" and "borrowed" would make everyone feel better than the blunt terms. My student responded to that letter to the editor with one of her own in which she made the point that euphemisms are ridiculous, making theft sound like a game. She had not yet learned to read the tone of the playful letter, but she was motivated to write because she was angry and because she had something to say. There is

no gimmick, no play money here. The student's pay was that she was able to participate in that exchange because she was accumulating knowledge about the way language works. Because she knows what euphemisms are, she can free herself from her o[illegible]bit of using them and from being fooled. Finally, her reward is that she can think more clearly.

Having opened a discussion of the idea that words can give us a faulty view of reality, my students and I move to essays about and discussion of language as a reflection of thought, either careful and precise or sloppy and vague. We read Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and I ask my students to examine the language they read by finding and analyzing a piece of writing that violates several of Orwell's six rules for clear writing. This is a difficult assignment because it requires clear thinking to analyze phrases and constructions students are used to seeing and using. It also requires attention to each word and, perhaps most difficult, it requires that students try to free themselves of the notion that if an article is published, it is perfect. To do this assignment, students must learn that a phrase like "the use of," as it is most commonly used, has no value. By paying attention to every word, students realize that a phrase like "surrounded on three sides" is ridiculous no matter where it is published. This writing assignment asks students to begin to develop a critical reading habit; it also suggests to them that they can make their own writing clearer and more precise by choosing their words and phrases carefully rather than letting habit dictate.

The Orwell essay examines connections between language and thought and shows that sloppy language leads us to have sloppy thoughts, just as sloppy thoughts make us use language carelessly. I pursue that discussion with my students to teach them that people make language what it is, just as in many ways, the language we know makes us what we are. It is important for them to know that they can make their language clearer if they want to. And it is important for them to know that the language we know governs our thoughts

and our perceptions of the world. Most of my freshmen have not thought before that their vocabularies have something to do with the thoughts they can have; they have not known that their language encourages them to be aware of several shades of color but only one kind of snow. They have not been aware that their language makes them actually see the world in inches and feet rather than in meters. They have not articulated the fact that they cannot construct English sentences without stating a time; maybe they have never before been aware that their language makes them perceive time as linear--past, present and future.

Many of those students have not known that words--not only in denotation, but also in connotation--make them think of themselves and of other people in ways that are not entirely accurate. When we come to that point, again I try to teach students that they can make their thinking and their language more precise by examining language and their habits. For reading I assign essays that examine the connections between language and prejudice; my students discuss the connotations of words like "Indian," "retard," "girls," "librarian," and "democracy." To motivate students to learn more about their thoughts and their personal prejudices formed by language, I assign this paper:

> Read several articles by or about a stereotyped group of people. Write a paper in which you explain what you have discovered about that group: has your reading made you rethink the stereotype label? did you learn that the category name was accurate or misleading? did the label constrict your tghoughts? how do you perceive the group after you have read articles about it or articles by members of it?

By doing that assignment, one student began to liberate himself from his prejudices about women. He learned that many of his notions about women were not justified by his experiences, that they were simply notions he had acquired--without thought or examination--by hearing words and phrases like "women drivers," "crying like a girl," "prissy," "weak," and "feminine." He examined the contexts in which he had heard those words and he realized that he had

allowed other peoples' attitudes and tones of voice to shape the way he thought about girls and women. He realized that his own language habits perpetuated the stereotype and the prejudices for other people; and he wrote that when he learned what he had let language do to him, he was ashamed, as he had been when as a child he was punished for hitting his little sister. That student's rewards were awareness that language had constricted his thoughts and knowledge that he could change his view of the world if he wanted to examine language.

Learning to master any complicated tool is hard work; gaining control is the reward. Students who begin the semester by looking at relatively simple and familiar but unexamined language habits and who learn that they already know something about the topic, want to learn more about the language they use. Language is a fascinating academic subject. And as they learn more about how language works, students gain confidence in writing because they have an interesting topic, because they have something to say about it, and because they know how to make language work for them. They learn that they can choose words; that they do not have to be slaves to habit; that if they know how language works, they can liberate themselves for clear thinking and writing about any subject they choose. Those are not gimmick motivations. Those rewards are not play money.